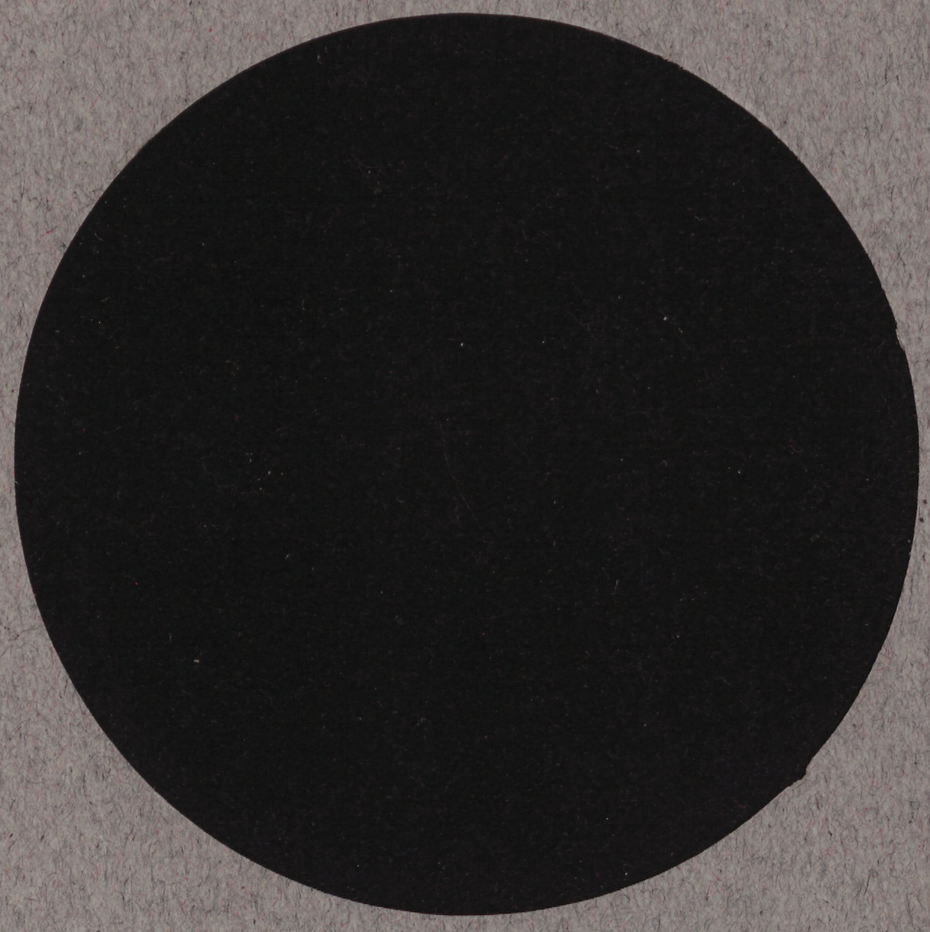
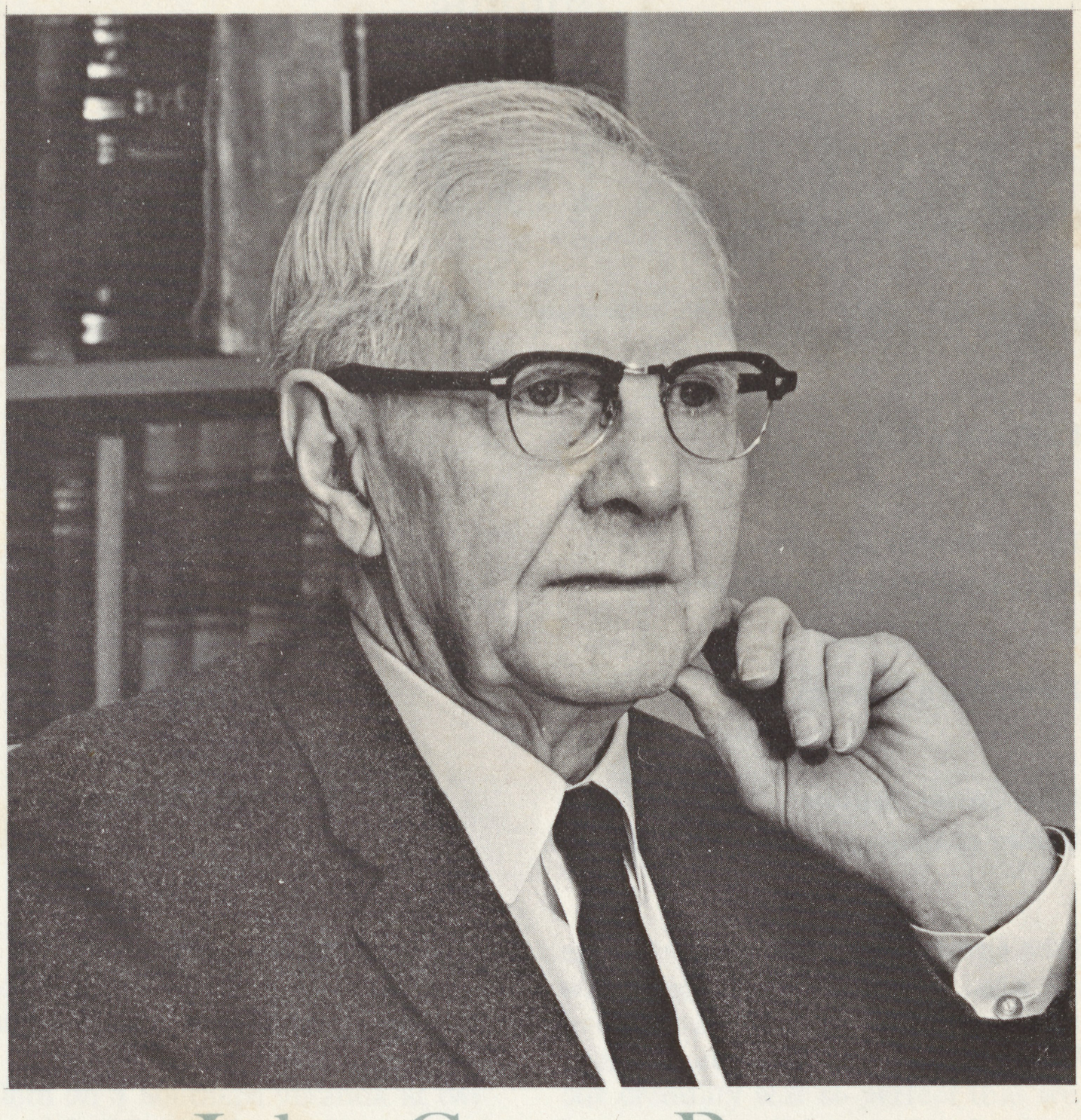
Kalamazoo College
REVIEW



A Tribute



to John Crowe Ransom

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Gentleman in a Dustcoat

Address by Allen Tate at the Honors Day Convocation, Kenyon College, April 30, 1968

My title alludes for the moment to the gentleman in his literal presence, not at all in his allegorical significance. For he is very much here, before our eyes, and there is no impatient young lady ready to talk back to him on a Southern veranda at twilight. But we could find her if we needed her and tried hard enough; and she need not be Southern; she is every woman with her first love. And the old gentleman on the dim piazza has been Mr. Ransom's constant *persona*, from his first to his latest poem, through whom he tells us that nothing will last, all will go and that our mastery of decay and death is ironically the cultivation of "grave rites and funerals." The man whom we honor today at the end of his eightieth year is one of the great elegiac poets of the English language.

I am not sure how long his old friends have known this. If we didn't know it early it was not entirely our fault, unless our respect for him, which led us to believe what he said about himself, has been a fault. For he told us years ago that as a poet he preferred to be "deliberately minor," and our credulity was so perfect that we believed that he was accomplishing only what he preferred. Nor could we have predicted that he would be a great editor. That is the price we paid for being first his students and then his friends, for friendship kept us from seeing the dust-coated gentleman, his Doppelganger, who was present even when, as a brisk young man, he walked fifty miles in one day, or played eight sets of tennis, or thirty-six holes of golf followed the same evening by several rubbers of bridge, or by a poker game in which Mr. Warren, Mr. Lytle, and I usually lost more than we could well afford to lose. He was that rare man — lucky both at games and in love. I scarcely need to re-

mind you that this quiet man, whose life has been so perfectly private that it could bear any public scrutiny, has given us poems which are minor only in that they are not long, but major in their inclusive irony. For no poet of our age, not even his exact contemporary, T. S. Eliot, has surpassed him in the awareness of the shadowy back room of the human condition, where "invisible evil, deprived and bold," makes its bid for domination. Yet looked at closely, all the magnificent poems of the Ransom canon are love poems, celebrating love's triumph even in renunciation. The famous "precious objects" are the objects of love, even though they must, like the lovers, vanish into the thin air of human failure and eventually of death. When Dante began one of his *rime* by addressing "Ladies who have intelligence of love," we may not doubt the intelligence of the ladies of Florence, though we must surmise that the masters of *lo bello stile nuovo* had taught the ladies first how to feel that sort of love, and then the language in which to talk about it. Mr. Ransom began to write his powerful elegies in the early nineteen-twenties, when our new twentieth-century styles were reaching towards maturity. Yet even his great contemporary, Wallace Stevens, master of one of the new styles, could not have joined Dante's circle. For in Stevens human beings cannot act because there are no human beings in Stevens' world; the only intelligence in that world is the poet's own. It is a high intelligence, but it is concerned with epistemology, not with love.

I do not make this comparison in denigration of Wallace Stevens, whom I admired as a poet and cherished as a friend; but rather to suggest a difference that will enable us to see more clearly than before John Ransom's unique position in the twentieth-century Allegory of Poets. Wallace Stevens — for I must refer to him again — had much in common with our friend: both are masters of formal versification, both have qualities of diction that have been superficially described as elegant, and both maintain a fastidious detachment from the existential muddle of our time. So far, so much alike; but the differences are greater than the similarities. Stevens' external world was inhabited only by sense-perceptions, from which he derived imaginative fictions that might, but never did, lead to a Supreme Fiction. But for Mr. Ransom the world out there is more than a source of Berkleian sensations that may be organized into fictions. It is there when we are not looking at it; it is there when we are not breaking our heads against it; it is there when we are not trying to use it for power or for our own self-destruction. The world out there, in short, is real; it need not be opposed to us if we will limit our access to it and respect its mystery as a man respects the mystery of the woman he loves. Nature, in this classical dualism, is not an *it;* it is a *thou* no less than the *thou* in the *I-Thou* relation of human beings. The Ransomian irony tells us (may I say parenthetically that all great poetry is in a didactic mode?) — this irony tells us how far we exceed or fall short of the proper relation between man and nature, or between man and woman, for the nature out there is biologically also nature in us. The young man who was full of her long white arms and milky skin could not see the whole woman; so the grey doves descended from her tower, and the lovers renounced each other because their consummated love would have been excessive on his part, defective on hers. The serene conclusion of this great elegy will haunt a few people as long as our violent civilization shall last:

> *Equilibrists lie here; stranger tread light;*
> *Close but untouching in each other's sight;*
> *Mouldered the lips and ashy the tall skull.*
> *Let them lie perilous and beautiful.*

If the earth is here (wherever here may be) after two thousand years, may not an archaeologist (should there still be archaeologists) find these lines in the rubble we leave behind us, and ask himself: Why did this civilization go down if it had men like the author of this poem?

Nobody in any civilization has been able to answer that question. But that we once had a high civilization is witnessed by the plain fact that certain men who formed it and were formed by it can live on into its decline "To dip, alas, into some unseemlier world." For Mr. Ransom has lived into this less seemly world, neither accepting it nor rejecting it, neither alienated nor engaged, but balanced between past and present, knowing that *all this* has happened before, and *may* happen again. The dustcoat — how well I remember the dustcoats of sixty years ago!—that dustcoat warns us to slow up, to take thought, to come out of our Gnostic dream of perfection back into the actual world, where human reality is in the commitment to the limited human condition, which allows us only the irony of imperfect love.

What I have been trying to say came to me gradually, years ago, as if I had been a Jamesian character starting in ignorance on a high quest, but not knowing what I should find at the end. We — and by we, I mean Mr. Warren, Mr. Lytle, and myself — we could not have known, almost fifty years ago, that John Ransom, our instructor in ad-

vanced composition, would soon be a great poet in the elegiac mode. Even when the great poems began to appear in the early Twenties we did not know it. How could we? What was a poet like? We didn't know any poets; we had merely heard of them. I suppose I expected poets to be like Shelley, or like James Thomson (B.V.), or perhaps like Ernest Dowson. But here was a poet who was merely a college professor and a gentleman. Had we had enough sense at that time to understand that a poet could be like that, we should have thought it almost too good to be true!

I remember the bright autumn day when I first saw John Crowe Ransom, almost forty-nine years ago, in the suite of Walter Clyde Curry at Vanderbilt. At that time both Mr. Ransom and Dr. Curry were young bachelor professors. Mr. Ransom, having reached the ripe age of thirty-one had just returned from the A.E.F. in France to resume his teaching at his Alma Mater. He came into Dr. Curry's study accompanied by a professor of mathematics, whom to my sorrow I already knew. I was introduced. Mr. Ransom took a step forward, bowed slightly, and shook my hand in the European style: the fingers only, not the full grasp. He backed away and sat down while the random conversation continued. I am sure that he did not speak until a few minutes later, when he rose, went to the bathroom door, and smiling said: "Back in a minute!" I did not hear him speak again until a few months later I looked up to him from the back row of his classroom.

The impropriety of recollecting here the first words I heard him speak will be diminished, I believe, if we bear in mind that Mr. Ransom can say anything with propriety because in the simple elegance of his language he always keeps aesthetic distance. I quote from the poet's report of the renounced lover's memory of the beloved:

Mouth he remembered; the quaint orifice
From which came heat that flamed upon the kiss.

Shelley would not have called the lady's mouth an orifice, nor would he have alluded to her body-heat; but flame, for love, he could have used. Coleridge had used it:

All thoughts, all passions, all delights,
Whatever stirs this mortal frame
Are but the ministers of love
And feed his sacred flame.

Mr. Ransom's cluster, orifice-flame-heat, is typical of his complex irony: the natural and the supra-natural together, the literal and the symbolic; and although there is no literal flame, lovers of the flesh are "stuprate" and burn themselves up, may I suggest, in the invisible flame of accelerated oxidation?

You will understand that this lucid complexity of diction comes out of the whole man, so that everything he says even in casual talk bears its mark. And you will remember that Ezra Pound tells us in a sequence of brilliant poems — the Hugh Selwyn Mauberly group — that the world was not good enough for him; and this is romantic irony. Mr. Ransom tells us in poem after poem that man himself is flawed in his duality: mind and body are "So hardly one they terribly are two"; and this is classical irony. It is the irony of Oedipus and Orestes; and some centuries later, of Major Robert Gregory.

If it produced a poetry of "tough reasonableness beneath the slight lyric grace," it no less informed one of the best critical minds of our age, issuing in a style of fluent precision and sobriety. It was this style that we were taught, though we never quite learned it, in a classroom in Science Hall at Vanderbilt University. He was not so much teaching us literature as teaching us how it is possible to think about literature. This kind of teaching could prosper at a small Southern university and later on the gentle acropolis of Gambier; but not, I believe, at any of the "great" universities, then or now.

I shall bring these — well, these what? Perhaps recollections of a passing age: I shall bring them to an end on a note of personal gratitude which I am not sure that he will like, but which I believe his friends gathered here will share. There was nothing inspirational in John Ransom's teaching; it was analytical, tentative, and understated; it assumed that we were men, not boys; and the civility of his demeanor was a gentle but severe reminder that we must try to behave like gentlemen, even when we were not. His role was that of *par inter pares*, a character to emulate but not to imitate; for nothing could have disturbed John Ransom so much as to turn out diminutive copies of himself. His courtesy relieved us of the necessity to commit regicide in order to be ourselves. None of his students is like him or like one another. If this is not the achievement of a great teacher — and the teacher was at once teacher, poet, and critic — I do not know how to describe his influence upon a group of men who by now are his only very slightly younger contemporaries. We are now old men. *Sunt lacrimae rerum sed mentem mortalia tangunt.* Years ago we could not have said: *Forsitan et haec olim meminisse iuvabit.* But we can say it now in the present tense: It is pleasant to remember these things.

A Little Note

To spread the hyacinthine hair and rear
The olive garden for the nightingales.

Not far off the campus of Bard College there is a bar to which both students and faculty resort in moments of need. I used to meet there, rather frequently, a young student of mine who was taking some poetry course with me, and whose pleasant habit it was to challenge me to a sort of mnemonic duel. This consisted largely of reciting by heart, and under the threat of vigilant and forceful correction, the poems of John Crowe Ransom; with a few items by Wyatt, Ralegh, and some Shakespeare sonnets thrown in as garnish. A fumble, a misplaced word, a palpable hesitation, meant paying for the next round. I am happy to report that I did not disgrace myself; but happier still to say that my antagonist, who was a philosophy major, and whose scrupulous devotion to these texts was exhibited with the purest delight and enthusiasm, came off with undoubted honor and repute.

It was a little like bear-baiting. Other students, less knowledgeable, stood around and took sides. If wagers were made, it was out of earshot. I was at first accounted the favorite, because of my faculty standing, as well as the fact that it was known that I had once studied with Mr. Ransom, and taught briefly at Kenyon. This was regarded, reasonably, as an advantage. But things began to even up rather soon. My student exhibited flying colors, and I believe he ended up getting a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship — in philosophy, of course.

These encounters were very pleasant for me, and kept me on my toes. And they served, moreover, cheerfully to remind me of my early and brief acquaintance with Mr. Ransom. I came to Kenyon just after the Second World War, at the suggestion of Robie Macauley, whom I had met in the army. I was by no means the only young man around Gambier who aspired to write poetry. We were a dedicated little group; we carefully read and discussed Mr. Ransom's poems, as well as his critical and theoretical prose; and at last, with a becoming timidity, we offered for each others' inspection our own works.

This was all extra-curricular, of course, but we treated each other quite respectfully. Not that we thought we were all that good, but because even in this we were trying to emulate Mr. Ransom. His pronouncements upon our work, when we had gathered enough courage to show him some, were couched invariably in a language that I have never been able to imitate. But the effect upon us all was the same, for we compared notes. We would leave his office, confident that we were young poets of manifest genius, and very nearly in the same league as Wordsworth or Keats. The next hour or so would be spent in a laureate daze, trying exactly to reconstruct the terms of his praise so as properly to relish them again and to report them to our friends. And this process of reconstruction was absolutely oracular, salutary and magical. For it frequently appeared that what Mr. Ransom had said was not necessarily to be construed as simple praise. It

# of Gratitude

took a little further meditation and thought to discover that like the Pythoness' advice to King Croesus, it was susceptible of more than one interpretation.

The effect of this extraordinary tact was easily as chastening as any sterner comment might have been. But it was far more kindly and generous, and not as discouraging. So we persisted in showing him our work, which he sometimes took a very considerable time to mull over, as it seemed to us. I remember that I once had given him what I thought was the very best thing I had turned out, and I had serious hopes that he would like it well enough to use in the *Kenyon Review*. By this time I had become a member of the Kenyon faculty myself, and had other preoccupations; but none so prominent as to let me forget, as time slipped by, that Mr. Ransom was brooding on my egg.

One day I went to call upon him in his office for some help and advice about a class I was teaching. It had something to do with Shakespeare, as I remember, and we were deeply and vigorously into it, when I looked past his head to the blackboard where he habitually wrote down the names of the contributors to the next issue of the *Review*, in the order in which they would appear. And there, to my astonishment, high on the list, and right between Trilling and Bentley, was my name. At this point Mr. Ransom was being very animated about Macbeth, and all for my benefit, but after a minute or two I could not contain myself, and abandoning all decorum, I interrupted him to ask whether this meant that I was to be in the next issue. He turned around to look at the blackboard, and in his very gentle southern voice said, "I seem to have made a slight mistake," whereupon he rose, went to the blackboard and erased the H in front of my name, and put down Br instead.

The fact is, he did actually publish my poem in the issue following this one; though it seems to me possible that simple embarrassment forced this upon him; it is not a poem I have ever been fond of since then, and I can't believe he could have been much taken with it. But at this period he was often preoccupied with Freud, and particularly with the essay on Wit and the Unconscious, and such slips and substitutions could not be regarded as wholly insignificant. Though it is not absolutely clear what they might signify. Still, of all the odd ways of breaking into print, this is surely one of the odder ones.

I have seen him very infrequently since those days, but whenever I do, he speaks with affection and interest of his former students who were there at my time. He has not lost track of their lives and their careers. And as one of that small and privileged group, I am sure I speak for more than myself alone in recording my deep sense of affection and gratitude for his kindness, his instruction and his example.

Anthony Hecht

Professor's

I should like to thank John Ransom publicly for making my job as a teacher of modern poetry easier than it would have been if his poems had not existed. In the early days of the modern poetry movement trying to interest students in Eliot, Yeats, Pound, Tate, and Stevens was sometimes rough going. Of course the bright ones with a natural aptitude for poetry caught on and liked what they read; not infrequently they became cultists. But the earnest ones who had to work at poetry were often really troubled. We all remember their doubts and questions. Isn't the poem too obscure to yield its meaning? Aren't the allusions so cumbersome that the reader wearies of hunting them down and may refuse to go on to the end? Aren't there too many private symbols whose significance cannot be known and can only be guessed at? What do we do with these references that seem to be intimate little jokes which only members of the poet's circle will understand? How is this passage to be taken: is it straightforward; ironic; accidentally or purposely ambiguous?

We did not have to counter such objections when a Ransom poem was being discussed. His poems moved into a student's life softly. No forcing or arguing was needed. I found, often, that the reader had simply enjoyed the poem in his first encounter. Only later did he notice that it was, by reason of structure, texture, and tone, a "modern" poem.

Why did a Ransom poem enter the student-reader's consciousness so smoothly? Of first importance, I think, is the beautiful clarity. One's comprehension moves with the forward movement of the ideas in the poem. The syntax is never dense, as it often is in Yeats. (For example, the fifth stanza of "Among School Children.") One knows where one is, in time and place, and who is speaking.

Poet

With Pound and Eliot knowing one's position in relation to the activity in the poem is not always easy to ascertain.

But this characteristic Ransom clarity is not just a matter of the order and movement of the ideas. The ironies and ambiguities are also accessible with only a little testing. In this respect there was no better poem to begin with than "Dead Boy." (It has made many converts.) The title is neutral. The poem proceeds to fill it with meaning. Here is the fact — dead boy. We soon learn what the fact means to "the country kin," the mother, the "foolish neighbors," the "elder men," and the Preacher. What it means to the narrator, "come from the world of outer dark," is a deeper matter, but we do not have to guess and leave it at that. Placed beside the ironies which narrator slyly introduces (they catch the reader's attention first) are hints that are strong enough to let us know what the fact means to him. Lesson I in Modern Poetry: The Uses of Irony and Ambiguity.

I shall not forget how John Ransom's "Judith of Bethulia" once helped me out in a rather spectacular way. I was lecturing and "precepting" in a course in Victorian Poetry. The enrollment was large and the students were skeptical sophomores waiting to be shown. The time was the mid-1930's, the period when the esteem of the eminent Victorians had fallen to the lowest point. I tried to make the course into a study of poetics, with illustrations from the Victorian poets and some others. To this end I required the students to write practical criticism based on "unknowns." Following I. A. Richards' method I used mediocre as well as successful poems. I also occasionally slipped in a modern poem. Once I tried "Judith of Bethulia," having no idea whether it would come across but hoping, of course, that it would. I did tell the group, as the work-sheets were being handed out, that all they needed to *know* in order to comprehend the poem was the outline of the Judith story as it appears in the *Apocrypha*. I told them the story.

To my delight a large majority of the students went straight to the center of the poem: the strange, sinister, indefinably ambiguous beauty of Judith. They "got" the puzzlement of the soldiers, the elders, and (especially) the young men. They were so pleasantly puzzled themselves that they wrote out their conjectures at unaccustomed length and so proved they were critics. Many even sensed how much of the poem's meaning is carried in the reserved, single-line answer which follows, in each stanza, the five-line bewildered query. A few looked up the *Apocrypha* story and reported learnedly that it was a dull tale in comparison with the poet's seven exciting stanzas. They also discovered that the poet had borrowed almost nothing but the fact of the killing and a few oddments such as this sentence: "My countenance deceived him to his destruction, and he did not commit sin with me, to defile and shame me." The clever ones who had spotted this "source" preferred the poet's remaking of it.

Nor brushed her with even so much as a daisy?
She found his destruction easy.

This is not the whole story of John Ransom's poems, the students, and me, but I hope it will suffice to make my point. Former students still write me about "Judith of Bethulia" day in 50 McCosh Hall. It is pleasant to be remembered as a teacher, not for one's histrionics, but for what one taught.

Willard Thorp

The Quality of Ransom: A Personal Acknowledgment

Classification of poets, particularly contemporary ones, seems to be a mere convenience, and often tiresome. For me, John Crowe Ransom escapes it. The poetical achievement that once burst upon me in "Philomela," in "Captain Carpenter," in "Blue Girls," without associations of Fugitive or even Southern, changed the whole world of modern poetry for me simply because the poems were what they were. I have had little fear that I would try to imitate them. Who could?

Most of these poems were written all too long ago by a living poet, and I hope that Mr. Ransom has many others, unseen, which he will still let us see. Essentially modern, they are not in any of the newest streams, and I suppose they are of their particular period, but that no more dates them than Campion is dated because he belongs to his.

But how can I, who am no critic, describe the quality of these poems. Despite his classical background, it seems not quite right to describe Ransom as a classicist. And yet there is something classical about his poetry. First of all, there is the demanded, the necessary, absolute control of the medium: not for its own sake but as a part of this series of achievements. The triumphant handling of rhymes and resolved metres corresponds to the handling of strict metrical schemes, more elaborate than English can allow or compass, by the best Greek and Roman poets. There is the power of the personality which infuses, and then is submerged in, the complete poem: which comes out as something strangely impersonal, and yet his best poems could never have been done by anyone else at all. And there is the constant genuine novelty and surprise. Certainly, I know of no better poems that have been written in my time.

Richmond Lattimore

John Crowe Ransom, Poet

James G. Donaldson

To begin this consideration of John Crowe Ransom, I want to play a sort of game with poems — not a critic's game, which has evaluation or remonstrance presumed as the goal, but an exploring game, such as a youngster wearied from other competition might engage in. In our diversion, we shall try to pass through poetry as through a country of the imagination, sketching topography as we go and remarking upon the characteristics of the inhabitants. And in preparation we will first quickly experience two miniature "territories": "Elegy for Jane," by Theodore Roethke, and "Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter," by Ransom.

Each poem is among the most-noticed of its author's works, and both embody a response to the unforeseen death of a young girl. Roethke's carries the subtitle, "My Student, Thrown by a Horse," and Ransom's subject is a rural child once to be found "among orchard trees and beyond," marshalling her geese. Roethke's beautiful lyric is not exemplary of his experimental verse, yet it sounds with a voice sufficiently distinct for our comparison. This is Roethke's poem:

I remember the neckcurls, limp and damp as tendrils;
And her quick look, a sidelong pickerel smile;
And how, once startled into talk, the light syllables leaped for her,
And she balanced in the delight of her thought,
A wren, happy, tail in the wind,
Her song trembling the twigs and small branches.
The shade sang with her;
The leaves, their whispers turned to kissing;
And the mold sang in the bleached valleys under the rose.
Oh, when she was sad, she cast herself down in such a pure depth,
Even a father could not find her:
Scraping her cheek against straw;
Stirring the clearest water.

My sparrow, you are not here,
Waiting like a fern, making a spiny shadow.
The sides of wet stones cannot console me,
Nor the moss, wound with the last light.

If only I could nudge you from this sleep,
My maimed darling, my skittery pigeon.
Over this damp grave I speak the words of my love:
I, with no rights in this matter,
Neither father nor lover.

Through images of plant, fish, and bird, in the first stanza, the dead girl begins to take vivid life again in the poet's remembrance, and the correspondent responses of joy and love from nature reinforce the resurrection (*The shade sang with her; . . . And the mold sang . . . The leaves, their whispers turned to kissing*). Only hinted at by the situation of her actual death ("Thrown by a Horse"), her status as a participating member of the natural community is developed in the remaining three stanzas. The poet suggests that even before her death Jane existed at a remove from humankind, in a passionate, physical communion with things of the natural world which he cannot duplicate (*The sides of wet stones cannot console me*). He can get close to her now only by invoking in his poem — the "words of my love" — varieties of the forms continually alive. So he visits her "damp grave," which is surely no mere grave, but the wet, fertile world he remembers her with. For all its life,

the garden, glade and forest are a grave and monument; because, except on Roethke's page, Jane is forever absent from the terrain of her metaphors. Only the language remains to tell us these things.

Ransom's language, on the other hand, does not furnish a like means for objectifying individual emotional responses. It neither re-creates the situation which prompted these feelings, nor does it lend itself to a direct utterance or confession of love or grief. "Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter" is a different kind of poem with other ends in view:

There was such speed in her little body,
And such lightness in her footfall,
It is no wonder her brown study
Astonishes us all.

Her wars were bruited in our high window.
We looked among orchard trees and beyond
Where she took arms against her shadow,
Or harried unto the pond

The lazy geese, like a snow cloud
Dripping their snow on the green grass,
Tricking and stopping, sleepy and proud,
Who cried in goose, Alas,

For the tireless heart within the little
Lady with rod that made them rise
From their noon apple-dreams and scuttle
Goose-fashion under the skies!

But now go the bells, and we are ready,
In one house we are sternly stopped
To say we are vexed at her brown study,
Lying so primly propped.

Though she, like Jane, was a vibrant person ("speed," "lightness"), this girl is no-one's student fondly revitalized through a personalized, organic metaphor. John Whiteside's daughter, instead, is a character in a miniature drama. The "little/Lady," a warrior with a rod engaging her "lazy geese," is carried by Ransom's definitively abstracting wit directly into the mythic and the imaginary. "Astonishes" and "vexed" are his uncommon replacements for *grieves* and *mourn*. More surprisingly, the old expression "brown study" describes the attitude in death. Neatly turning cliché around, the poet gives human qualities to the geese with their Edenic "apple-dreams." And John Whiteside's daughter, indomitable disturber of their peace, takes on a quality more metaphysical than physical — suggestively Christian ("Lady with rod") and chivalric ("Her wars were bruited in our high window"). In the theatre of her action, however, no illusions are allowed to persist about our late child-marshal's former powers: we know even less about the "shadow" with which she contended than we do of her harried flock. She is neither saint nor knight, but child — with, presumably, only a child's haphazard apprehension of the darkness which wiser elders might articulate more fully.

In the final stanza we are returned to the world of men, where deft alliteration and consonance evoke the adult observers' stasis, perplexity and discomfiture as they are brought up short in the house with the bells. We, too, observing poetic terrain at our greater distance, are taken by a surprise: the words and images have not acted upon our sympathy and evoked the pathos normally expected with such a circumstance. On the contrary, phenomenal existence is subjected totally to the dramatic scene. The familiar is enveloped in a deep, stylized environment. As we are distanced from the commonplace, its details do not blend but multiply before our senses. It is the neat paradox fine poets can display; it is phantasmagoria.

Like the mourners at the funeral of John Whiteside's daughter, Ransom's people are confronted with puzzles which mock their complacency or confusion and frustrate their desires. From the activities and postures available to men — love, combat, religious belief, to cite a few — they try to extract comfort, or to fix a direction which will take them out of their dilemmas. New awareness and solutions of a sort do come to a few of them. How restorative or operational the knowledge is remains another matter. The "Old Man Playing with Children" has such a story.

A discreet householder exclaims on the grandsire
In warpaint and feathers, with fierce grandsons and axes
Dancing round a backyard fire of boxes:
"Watch grandfather, he'll set the house on fire."

But I will unriddle for you the thought of his mind,
An old one you cannot open with conversation.
What animates the thin legs in risky motion?
Mixes the snow on the head with snow on the wind?

"Grandson, grandsire. We are equally boy and boy.
Do not offer your reclining-chair and slippers
With tedious old women talking in wrappers.
This life is not good but in danger and in joy.

"It is you the elder to these and younger to me
Who are penned as slaves by properties and causes
And never walk from your insupportable houses
And shamefully, when boys shout, go in and flee.

"May God forgive me, I know your middling ways,
Having taken care and performed ignominies unreckoned

Between the first brief childhood and the brief second,
But I will be more honorable in these days."

Clearly, the old man's middle-aged descendants in that first stanza view him with little sympathy. They little understand how much the possibilities for "honor" in his waning days are limited, or how much his being honored relies, absurdly, solely upon the uncertain memory of the youngest generation. In his time the life of danger and joy has escaped him, and he is too wise to express his late resolve by expressing it in words. Ransom, too wise to let him, leaves him to express it in action, and does the "unriddling" for him. The clash of his heroism and honor with the closed system that contains it is made all the more poignant by the threatening potency of his silence, unwittingly recognized by one of the threatened "slaves": *Watch grandfather, he'll set the house on fire.*

In fact, Ransom's poetry sponsors only obliquely the adventurers and darers. Their exploits are subverted by the same restrictions of circumstance or psychology which fetter the characters we have already observed. *Captain Carpenter rose up in his prime, / Put on his pistols and went riding out.* An easy mark for "rogues" and a "she-devil," he closes with them only to lose most of his physiognomy and limbs in the combat. Indefatigable, left finally with only tongue and heart, the Captain ingloriously loses the latter to an effete "knave," and the poem ends:

God's mercy rest on Captain Carpenter now
I thought him Sirs an honest gentleman
Citizen husband soldier and scholar enow
Let jangling kites eat of him if they can.

But God's deep curses follow after those
That shore him of his goodly nose and ears
His legs and strong arms at the two elbows
And eyes that had not watered seventy years.

The curse of hell upon the sleek upstart
That got the Captain finally on his back
And took the red red vitals of his heart
And made the kites to whet their beaks clack clack.

The old Captain, remnant of unpracticed and outmoded tradition, has mounted a crusade which, though apparently foolish and ineffectual, in the final analysis (which is the poem) really appears valiant and noble. Methods used to lay the old gentleman low were hardly commensurate with his threat as an adversary. Too brutal, too thoughtlessly destructive, too smug, his enemies' tactics serve to enhance the Captain's impulsive singleness of purpose. An ambitious version of the grandfather in war-paint, this Quixotic figure has been taken to represent the fall of the traditional church before a pallid "modern" Christianity. Those not so symbol-minded, remembering John Whiteside's daughter, will blend their theology with a more secular paraphrase to remark how the world deals with driven innocence which threatens its carnal complacency.

The lovers in Ransom's poetry enjoy no such complacency. Their agonies may work upon one another with all the fury of battle. "Two in August" quarrel and fly apart, becoming wanderers in regret and doubt —

How sleepers groan, twitch, wake to such a mood
Is not well understood,
Nor why two entities grown almost one
Should rend and murder trying to get undone
With individual tigers in their blood.

Again, in "Eclogue," Jane Sneed and John Black — to whom *Ten years ago, pretty it was in a ring/ To run as boys and girls do in the grass* — exchange opinion on their "darkened" love, one finally concluding, *We lovers mournfully/ Exchange our bleak despairs. We are one part love/ And nine parts bitter thought. As well might be/ Beneath ground as above.*

We have become used to defeat and disenchantment here. This rare compromise between the harsh demands of an impersonal ethics and the subversive entreaties of the natural and mutable does not astonish, it is so risky and frail in its energy. Why does it not go easy with lover or crusader? Why do even the spectators of their agonies find themselves shaken? The poem "Old Mansion" throws into relief the outlines of the last question and suggests an answer to both. In "Old Mansion" (which, with "Antique Harvesters" is one of Ransom's poems truly "Southern" in theme) the *persona* is an "intruder" upon the scene (recalling, for one, the member of "the world of outer dark" in "Dead Boy"). Posing as an historian, he seeks entrance to a decaying Southern mansion, because to him it betokens age by a precious grandeur removed from the "old vulgarian/ Reiterations which gentle readers abhor" — and which apply to the European decadence from which he has departed. This dilettante, smoking his foreign cigarette ("weed" being the perfect word for it, and an index to his habits of mind), notices the very real and foreboding signs of decline (". . . not distant, possibly not external to the property, were tombstones . . .") but attends superficially to the decorative (". . . the honeysuckle on its intricate stalk") and arrives at hasty judgments: "Stability was the character of its rectangle," he asserts (al-

though its "line was seen in part and guessed in part/ Through trees").

Despite this, he catches the "tone" of decay, and, troubled, is prompted into high statement and condescending action based upon his shallow motives.

. . . Decay was the tone of old brick and shingle
Green blinds dragging frightened the watchful heart

To assert, "Your mansion, long and richly inhabited,
Its exits and entrances suiting the children of men,
Will not forever be thus, O man, exhibited,
And one had best hurry to enter it if one can."

And at last, with my happier angel's own temerity,
Did I clang their brazen knocker against the door,
To beg their dole of a look, in simple charity,
Or crumbs of legend dropping from their great store.

But it came to nothing — and may so gross denial
Which has been deplored with a beating of the breast
Never shorten the tired historian, loyal
To acknowledge defeat and discover a new quest—

The old mistress was ill, and sent my dismissal
By one even more wrappered and lean and dark
Than that wrapped concierge and imperturbable vassal
Who bids you begone from her master's Gothic park.

Emphatically, the old house crumbled; the ruins
Would litter, as already the leaves, this petted sward;
And no annalist went in to the lords or the peons;
The antiquary would finger the bits of shard.

But on retreating I saw myself in the token,
How loving from my foreign weed the feather curled
On the languid air; and I went with courage shaken
To dip, alas, into some unseemlier world.

The failure of his foray does not daunt him at first — there is time enough to compose, in the aside beginning with "and may so gross denial . . .," his code of weakness and uncommitment. (Ransom's irony, we see again, can mock fiercely without ever indulging in viciousness.) But our "historian's" attitude has been revoked. The servant who dismissed him here was leaner and darker than his foreign counterpart. In the light of his failure and rejection, the manor's crumbling shows "Emphatically," and his specious outlook is finally shattered. In retreat he sees the unity of all decline (*How loving from my foreign weed the feather curled/ On the languid air*) and his own identity with it.

More explicitly than many of the others, this tale emphasizes the impossibility of escape from the circumstances that sustain and contain the human actor (and bleakly, too — we remember that "unseemly" also means *indecent*). The man who began by styling himself "an intruder" is brought to realize his full participation, his complicity, in the larger world which unmakes itself in rituals less pretty or picturesque. For the life of danger and of joy, then, some apprehension of the quality of motive and the challenges in environment is a necessary prerequisite — but it is no guarantee that the joy can be had free of risk, or even had at all.

Ransom dispenses no convenient anodyne — ideological, theological, or mystical. Rather, he turns his wit against that which, by appearing unshakeable or sacrosanct, would palliate reality. "Her Eyes" is a comic poem indicting the "extravagant hue" of a woman's blue eyes: they are contrasted with those of other mortals (*Those I wear upon my head/ Are sometimes green and sometimes red/ I said*) and found intimidating and suspiciously inhuman in their one-dimensionality:

To a woman that I knew
Were eyes of an extravagant hue:
Viz., *china blue.*

Those I wear upon my head
Are sometimes green and sometimes red,
I said.

My mother's eyes are wet and blear,
My little sister's are not clear,
Poor silly dear.

It must be given to but few,
A pair of eyes so utter blue
And new;

Where does she keep them from this glare
Of the monstrous sun and the wind's flare
Without any wear;

And were they never in the night
Poisoned by artificial light
Much too bright;

And had the splendid beast no heart
That boiled with tears and baked with smart
The ocular part?

I'll have no business with those eyes,
They are not kind, they are not wise,
They are two great lies.

A woman shooting such blue flame
I apprehend will get some blame
On her good name.

Indeed, by this time in the poem the "blame" has already fallen to her! In an allied poem, Ransom employs architectural vocabulary to deplore a "Painted Head" which *Smiles from the air a capital on no/ Column or a Platonic perhaps head/ On a canvas sky depending from nothing.* The "Head" so painted, without "The increase of body," is "unlovely" and intimates death, "having vigorously traduced the flesh" in this example of "the extravagant device of art."

. . . Beauty is of body.
The flesh contouring shallowly on a head
Is a rock-garden needing body's love
And best bodiness to colorify

The big blue birds sitting and sea-shell flats
And caves, and on the iron acropolis
To spread the hyacinthine hair and rear
The olive garden for the nightingales.

The same sentiment holds also for any reductive dogma which would gloss over the quick, intricate source it purports to clarify. Nowhere does the poetry promise that our pleasures will increase if we should begin to peruse the world's dynamism and its dissension unsimplistically; it intimates instead that the hazards may well proliferate, especially if our sincerity be unsophisticated. In Ransom's country, as in life, are folly, pain and death which no amount of sentimental romanticism or short-sighted ethics can disperse.

This metaphor for our survey-game—the "country" of John Crowe Ransom's poetry — is borrowed from Randall Jarrell, who used it with the economy and grace which distinguished so much of his work. In this presentation we can only hope that it is disengaged sufficiently to permit the poetry itself to stand as its own testimonial. Then we can see first-hand the distinctive attention Ransom gives to language: how he revives and freshens those words gone into disuse; or how he begins at the root of a familiar word, forcing all the buried meanings out of it and setting them to playful combat with each other and with our preconceptions.

The vision disappeared, and so it will be with the world itself, and ourselves. This is said with some pretty doubling between the vernacular and the Latinity; as if one had better deal with it now one way and again the other way, that is, playfully, gracefully, not too grimly and willfully.

These are Ransom's comments upon Prospero's speech which explains the vanishing of the masque characters in Act IV of *The Tempest* (the speech which ends . . . *We are such stuff/ As dreams are made on; and our little life/ Is rounded with a sleep*). Without letting slip our proportions, may we not say that John Crowe Ransom has a smack of this himself?

Assuredly it transpires as we read: that these poems, tales, dramas and tableaux are written to no formula and submit to no label — they deal with their world "now one way and again the other way." Simultaneously, these quaintly envisioned, recognizably human "stories" in their para-human conceits would have us know — as critics — that unmindfully we may drive danger, joy, and poetry out of our living by means of their modern replacements, pragmatism and pedantry. In a lecture (lively and not the least pedantic) a few years ago on favorite authors, Karl Shapiro made us an appropriate paradox, saying, "Ransom is a poet as excellent as any in the English anthology. Hence he seems an anachronism to our time, when the perfect exists as imperfection." Lest we affirm his judgment but pass over the paradox, in our wise concurrence we shall turn up another poem to startle us into perception:

Vision by Sweetwater

Go and ask Robin to bring the girls over
To Sweetwater, said my Aunt; and that was why
It was like a dream of ladies sweeping by
The willows, clouds, deep meadowgrass, and the river.

Robin's sisters and my Aunt's lily daughter
Laughed and talked, and tinkled light as wrens
If there were a little colony all hens
To go walking by the steep turn of Sweetwater.

Let them alone, dear Aunt, just for one minute
Till I go fishing in the dark of my mind:
Where have I seen before, against the wind,
These bright virgins, robed and bare of bonnet,

Flowing with music of their strange quick tongue
And adventuring with delicate paces by the stream, —
Myself a child, old suddenly at the scream
From one of the white throats which it hid among?

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John Crowe Ransom: Master

Walter W. Waring

Applied to literature, baroque describes works of complex forms, striking tensions, and ambiguous or paradoxical imagery; but the function of these characteristics is a deeper matter. The appearance of verbal ambiguity and paradox, which give rise to the tensions in modern poetry, calls attention to the fact that the conventions and the values identified by the poet's diction no longer represent an acceptable view of reality, but that they propose instead opposing communities of belief or experience. In addition to meeting these descriptive qualifications, the poetry of John Crowe Ransom is baroque in the degree to which the poet is able to use these tensions to create a new basis for community in his poetry by refocusing the tensions that seem to make up a large part of human experience today. The artistic unity thus achieved by the baroque artist transcends both the conventional and that which opposes it without destroying either. Ambiguities, paradoxes, or ironies tend to resolve in a view of man that is neither parochial nor romantic. As do other baroque masters, Mr. Ransom seeks always to re-establish community on the broadest possible contemporary basis, not to point out its schisms.

Recognizing the fact that man lives in a time when words evoke archaic or obsolescent communities yet fail to establish a *weltanschauung* that unifies human experience any longer, Mr. Ransom rejects solipsism or irony to attempt a much more difficult objective. In general, the diction of his poetry evokes two or more contexts or communities which are unrelated or even antagonistic to one another. Within the course of the poem, the opposed contexts or communities are related to the mortal situation in such a way that their apparent

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ambiguity, paradox, or irony fades into the new unity forged by the poem. The reader of Ransom's poetry thus finds conflicting ideologies, customs, or events subordinated to a more inclusive humanity which becomes the aesthetic community of the poem. Ransom's poems do not multiply ambiguities or enforce isolations, but rather establish a community in which all men share mortality.

Of course, Mr. Ransom's poetry is by no means as simple as this description of his general procedure seems to suggest. A wide range of particularities exists within the compass of his general method. The communities of things and ideas expressed in his poems appear at first glance to be expressions of the ambiguous, the paradoxical, or the ironic; but in fact Mr. Ransom resolves the incongruities more often than not in a deeper synthesis. The degree to which the contexts represented in the poems appear to be incongruent establishes the degree of tension available to the poem and identifies the particular spectrum of emotional tone available for resolution in the poem. The tensions employed by the baroque artist can express every isolating emotional stance known to man, but these emotions are resolved in human sensibilities that are broader and more inclusive than anything suggested by the tensions themselves. This is not to say that Mr. Ransom is mystic in the way of Yeats, moralistic in the way of Eliot, or intellectual in the way of Stevens. The hard center of his poems, the resolution of the conflict of the context contained in them, is neither wise instruction, a pithy moral, nor any mystic or philosophical verbalization offered in explanation of the events of life. Mr. Ransom's poetry rejects all canards to approximate aesthetically the realities of human existence.

His method of accomplishing a community of man instead of attempting a community of ideals, ideas, or conventions simply reverses the practice of many modern poets. Instead of assuming that shattered ideologies destroy human community, Ransom seems to assume that they amplify it. In "Here Lies a Lady," he presents the death of a lady of "beauty and high degree" loved and honored by all who know her. The victim of fever and chills, she dies in spite of the attention of doctors and the love of her family. Her death is characterized by no distinguishing agonies or premonitions. Dying after six rounds of fever and chills, she is honored by those who mourn her passing. The human condition of the lady, her loveliness and her mortality, is fully accepted. She is distinguished from mankind neither in the mode of her dying nor by any disaffection in those who love her. "But was she not lucky?" writes the poet. "No," we answer if we allow one of the conventions held in tension in the poem to distract us from what the poem says, but we answer "Yes," if we look steadfastly at the facts before us. No cruel questions are posed by the poem. Friends and family accept her death without self-torment or bitterness, gratified, perhaps, that her rounds of fever and chill were no more than six.

The appreciation of baroque art requires that the conventions present in the work are transcended by the facts of it. That the doctors fail to cure the lady of fevers and chills implies no inadequacy on their part, even though their cures fail. That the lady leaves behind her a motherless child, an adoring aunt, and a loving husband proposes a paradox of human loss; but the central fact of mortality

transcends these issues. Isolating perceptions of irony or paradox, or equally isolating emotions of pity for the lady or those who mourn her, are resolved in the larger acceptance of her fate. The poem rejects any tendency to renounce death as pathetic, paradoxical, or hostile to man or to human events.

Much the same strategy is found in "Bells for John Whitside's Daughter." Here the potentials for paradox and irony are much greater if the poem is read in the context of romantic self-pity or Victorian moral philosophy because the dead mortal is a child characterized by gracefulness and love of life. Again, however, Mr. Ransom uses conventional views of death simply as tensions to be resolved in larger issues. Those who mourn the child's death neither damn the universe for its cruelty in ending an attractive human life nor pity themselves for their loss. They are, indeed, vexed by the vast difference that lies between the child living and the child dead, but they accept her death and continue life without her. Whatever the expectations of convention, the participants in this event are not isolated by an event which each must sometime face. They miss the child's liveliness much as the geese miss her harassments, but the unexpected difference between life and death does not plunge them into new distractions.

"Piazza Piece," a third poem about death, moves the point of view from that of an observer to that of participants. Death appears as a gentleman caller before a young lady who sits on a piazza behind a trellis of roses waiting for her true love. He tells her that he must have her soon and tries to make her understand his necessity. But the young lady sees him only as a grey man whose words are faint and dry, and she warns him off. The tension of the poem lies between the certainty of death and the romantic hopes of the lady. In this poem, the irony is not resolved; instead, it remains the poem's affective level. Appearing before the young lady as an old gentleman, death is rejected by her as an unacceptable suitor. Unlike the characters in "Here Lies a Lady" or "Bells for John Whitefield's Daughter," who reject romantic or philosophical incongruities of life for the acceptance of mortality, the young lady in "Piazza Piece" cannot accept what life holds for all mortals. She rejects the community of man by her demand for preferential treatment. Thus, the irony of the poem is found in her inability to accept death as the only lover who will ever approach her. The isolation of the young lady is heightened by her lonely self-consciousness. She cannot accept the mortal community, but lives instead in the isolation of romantic expectation.

Tensions in each of these poems are supplied by diction that refers to the fading communities of conflicting conventions. Edgar Allan Poe once wrote that the best subject for a poem is a beautiful woman dead, but Poe was thinking in the context of a romanticism that made the most of mutability and the defeat of human expectations. His views result in the isolation of the pathetic or grotesque. In contrast, Mr. Ransom's poems are baroque because he neither romanticizes change or the defeat of human wishes nor philosophizes on them; instead, he makes use of those conventions to create a brighter reality. Dying in beauty and in the loving ministrations of family and doctors, the beautiful lady of "Here Lies a Lady" discloses the convention of the beautiful lady dead; but it also discloses the community of the adoring family that may be isolated by her death if they do not accept it as a fact of mortality. An ironic reading in the conventions of romantic self-seeking or Victorian moralizing is blocked by the failure of those who love the lady to respond to the paradoxes and ironies of death that are part of the conventions of the nineteenth century. As do all baroque artists, Ransom makes use of obsolescent conventions; but he uses them to emphasize a reality more appropriate to his day.

The verbal tensions in "Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter" work in much the same way. The diction of the poem associates the little girl with the communities of life, nature, and death. But, as in "Here Lies a Lady," her death does not plunge her friends and family into conventional ironies, philosophical searchings, or romantic paradoxes. They are ready to continue their activities in life, even though "sternly vexed" by the change death has wrought in the lively child. In sharp contrast, "Piazza Piece" points out the irony of human wishes. The young lady in this poem, waiting for her own true love to come and carry her away, is unable to recognize him in the old grey man who approaches her. Unprepared for life, she is also unprepared for death. In contrast to Emily Dickinson, who also depicts death as a gentleman caller, Mr. Ransom views the dramatic meeting neither romantically nor philosophically. In "Piazza Piece," the irony focuses heavily upon the young lady who foolishly believes that her romantic dreams will be fulfilled. The baroque quality of the poem exists both in the powerful tension between the expectation of the young lady and that of death and the irony with which the conventional attitude is treated.

Admittedly, these three poems are not among the most complex writen by Mr. Ransom, even

though they do illustrate his baroque style. Baroque complexity is achieved in "The Equilibrist." The contexts identified by the diction of this poem are the conventional ones of love and honor, and the lovers themselves are baroque masters of their awareness of the conflict that they see existing between the conventional values. Driven by conflicting values, the lovers "Dreadfully had forsworn each other, and yet / They were bound each to each, and they did not forget." In addition to the powerful tension he finds between honor and love, the poet sees an unusual beauty in the equilibrium that the lovers find between their tensions. In rejecting both sexless heaven and passionate hell, the lovers become a memorial to a human integrity that is more beautiful than either love or honor. "Their flames were not more radiant than their ice" describes the knife-edged focus of the tensions that reveal the beauty of a mortal sanctity. "Let them lie perilous and beautiful" concludes the poet as he discovers a beauty created entirely from human sensitivities.

Discovering powerful tensions in conventional values, the poem seems destined, at first, to become a statement of irresolvable paradox, but Mr. Ransom looks beyond convention to a beauty that transcends monolithic virtue. Qualified neither for heaven nor for hell, the lovers create for themselves a sophisticated paradise, where fulfillment is achieved by sacrificing neither honor nor desire to achieve either. As close, though untouching, in death as in life, the couple are saints in an order of human existence that bridges the paradoxes of conventional perspectives. In diction, structure, and tone, "The Equilibrists" is a masterpiece of baroque art.

One of the best examples of Mr. Ransom's baroque style is "Captain Carpenter." In this poem both the conventions of the picaresque narrative and the moral allegory are suggested, but neither is accepted. Captain Carpenter, who has the adventures though not the success of the picaresque hero, comes off second best in each of his encounters. Lacking the success of the picaresque hero disqualifies him as a representative of that convention and seems to qualify him as an allegorical hero, an everyman moving towards death and judgment; but the fact that his adventures are instructive neither to him nor to the observer disqualifies him as the figure of conventional allegory. If his defeats and losses make no difference to him, why should they be significant to the reader? Should he side with the speaker who curses those who destroyed the captain? The nature and the identity of the Captain's opponents are not well enough established to become the objects of the reader's indignation. Furthermore, the facts of the poem seem to prove that the Captain operates in a moral context that has no criteria.

Unable to read the poem as either a moral or a romantic action, the reader is left to contend with the tensions of the poem. Apparently the Captain lives the only way he can. He maintains his course in life in spite of his losses and his handicaps. Mr. Ransom is once more pointing out the real, though exaggerated, universe of mortal behavior. Man is defined only by actions that reveal his mortality to its fullest degree. The commentary of the observer makes just this point. "I thought him Sirs an honest gentleman / Citizen husband soldier and scholar enow / Let jangling kites eat of him if they can." Neither his curses nor his tendency to moralize disturbs the kites anticipating their forthcoming feast on the Captain's disfigured body. The hard center of the poem is safely beyond the dreams and nightmares of the Captain's misadventures and the commentary of the observer. Thus, the ironies of the poem are peripheral to the hard facts at its center. The facts, themselves, betray no isolating self-pity, no warped "over-reaching," and no pious condemnation of the universe. The community discovered in the details of this unusual narrative is the mortal community in which the actor seeks out the events that establish his brotherhood with all men.

Mr. Ransom stands almost alone as a contemporary master of the baroque style. Rejecting the solipsism or the nihilism adopted by many of his generation, he uses the convention of waning traditions to create a difficult art from communities in tension. Beyond the paradox of conflicting contexts, he finds the beauty of human events in lives that accept mortality. The fact that Mr. Ransom chose to establish an inclusive community during a period that is characterized by increasing factionalism in all areas is, perhaps, as significant as the fact that he accomplished his objective with distinction. Many of his contemporaries set as the objective of their work the portrayal of a culture in conflict. In fact, the number of poems published during the decades following the outbreak of World War I that are devoted to ambiguous, paradoxical, or ironic views of life far outweighs those that reassert a community available to all mankind. John Crowe Ransom and others who chose to find a continuing basis for human community were naturally led to baroque expression; for in times of rapid changes in cultural and social values, the baroque art is alone in preserving the permanent values of the human situation.

John Crowe Ransom,

Bread Loaf in the summer of 1939 was populated largely by school teachers, most of them middle-aged ladies patiently gathering credits toward a Middlebury MA. But there was a small group of younger people — Richard Eberhart was there that summer, if I remember — hired to wait on tables or roll the tennis courts. We didn't actually get paid. We had been awarded scholarships, and our compensation lay in being able to attend the courses taught by Willard Thorp and John Crowe Ransom, to play baseball with them and Robert Frost in Frost's back yard, and to spend the evenings talking at Ransom's house. Some have become poets since, and almost all of us are teachers. We are very different teachers than we would have been if we had not come to know John that summer. He touched us and changed us.

Not that there was anything dramatic about it. We hardly knew what was happening, or not at first. John taught a course in Seventeenth Century Lyric at ten o'clock, and we came to it direct from Shakespeare taught by Donald Stauffer, who truly was dramatic and whose every lecture was a brilliant tour de force. Every morning the change was almost physically palpable. Ransom stood easily before the class — I always see him now in grey flannels and a blue jacket, though he must have worn other things at times — and taught extemporaneously in a quiet voice that just managed to compete with the sound of lawnmowers outside the open windows. When he read a poem, there was no rhetoric in his voice nor anything that could have savored of what the schoolteachers once called interpretative reading. He had too much love for a good poem not to let it stand on its own, and too much regard for his students to come between us and the poet. He simply read with a quiet dignity, and beneath his restraint we could feel his affection for the thing.

It made a strangely meaningful triangle — a poem by Vaughan or Marvell, perhaps, the students, and John. He never taught us "about" a poem or expected us to see it through him. What counted was the poem and us, and he assumed that we would work down that leg of the triangle without his intruding between us. Meantime, if we chose, we were welcome to watch him encountering the verse, not as *magister* but simply as another human reader, and not in order that we should imitate his responses but, one level beyond that, in order that we should work with them and against them. Our own responses to the poem and our responses to his encounter with it hung in a tension that gave Vaughan or Marvell a meaning far beyond the powers of any didactic teaching to convey. Yet it was all very easily, very graciously done. He so much respected the poem and so much respected us that he taught it, as he had read it, practically anonymously. In spite of the gentlemanly grace with which he did it, I have since learned how much restraint that takes.

I don't think any of us fully understood what was happening in John's classes until he taught *Lycidas*. It was then that I, at least, began to see what he was doing, and it was then that I realized how much poetry and teaching are the same. He

Teacher

began speaking of the need of restraint if the poet is to avoid coming between the reader and the poem, of the necessity of Milton's retiring behind the pastoral convention if *Lycidas* was to be about the death of Henry King instead of about John Milton himself. And then, as he worked with the poem, we began to see how Milton's own urgency forces him to violate the established conventions, how he almost intrudes and manages to be present without quite doing so, so that there is a tension between our responses to the death of King and what we feel for and toward the poet. I can remember realizing that summer morning — somehow the moments of revelation always remain sharp and clear — that *Lycidas* would have been nothing but so much pastoral furniture if Milton had not come in or nothing but sheer sentiment if he had intruded too much, and that the whole thing hung on his remaining practically, not quite, anonymous. And I remember understanding, quite suddenly, that this was what John was doing when he taught.

Many of John's poems work the same way, for he is all of a piece and his verse is a metaphor of his teaching. There will be something very simple, careless girls in blue on the green lawns of their school, two lovers who have chosen neither to part nor to take the way of dishonor, or a dead boy, the last of a proud Virginian line. Then there will be an "I," never intruding, never didactic, but responding to the thing much as John himself would respond to a poem he was teaching in class. Once again, as readers or students — there is so little difference — we also respond, and not just to the girls or the lovers or the boy, but to the "I" at the same time. And again there is the tension and something is understood better because there is someone else there, experiencing it too, to cast a different light on it or see it from another side and so provide the paradox and ambiguity which is depth.

When I said earlier that we none of us teach as we would have if we had not been taught by John, it was this restraint I was talking about, this willingness to be, apparently, just another reader among those he taught. We do not emulate him very well, but we have all learned some of his respect for the poem and the student. We none of us succeed in remaining so nicely anonymous, but in our clumsier ways we try to stay out from between a poem and our students and to give them as much of ourselves as they need to work with and against. Willard Thorp gives eloquent testimony elsewhere in this issue to how effectively John goes on teaching students, through his poetry, though they be in other men's classes, and Jim Donaldson's fine piece stands as evidence. Through his poems, and through those of us he taught, John Crowe Ransom will go on teaching for a long time. He will not have the students before him, and though he will be present they will not see him there, but that is as it should be for one who has always preferred to remain practically anonymous.

Laurence N. Barrett

For John Crowe Ransom

Old man, I'd stack up Latin verbs like cord
Wood in my head if from that hoard might spring
The club that reaved of all his running
Red-hearted Captain Carpenter. Words!
Words! Janet's dainty morning, curled and feathered —
Transmogrified in an instant, in a word, stung
To a comedy of venom and a purpling
Comb; then, once more translated, as the words
Move, to a new walking and a new sleep.
Judith, whose beauty shivered the barbarous tent
And fevered the dreams of her craven townsmen, went
Neither in blue nor gray but in the raiment
Of words, smooth-muscled as her rich flesh and deep
In terror as the bearded spoil she keeps.

Conrad Hilberry

Contributors

Allen Tate — critic, author, poet; professor of English, University of Minnesota, since 1951. Among his latest books: *Collected Essays*, 1960; *Poems*, 1962.

Anthony Hecht — poet, professor of English, University of Rochester. Recipient of the Pulitzer Prize in Poetry for *The Hard Hours*, 1967, announced in May, 1968.

Willard Thorp — recently retired from the department of English at Princeton University where he taught from 1926. Among his latest books: *American Writing in the Twentieth Century*, 1960; *American Humorists*, 1964.

Richmond Lattimore — the Paul Shorey professor of Greek at Bryn Mawr College. Books include: *Sestina for a Far-Off Summer*, 1962; *The Frogs of Aristophanes*, 1962; *Story Patterns in Greek Tragedy*, 1964; editor of *The Complete Greek Tragedies* (with David Greene).

James G. Donaldson — senior English major at Kalamazoo College from Detroit, Michigan.

Walter W. Waring — professor of English, Kalamazoo College, since 1949.

Laurence N. Barrett — professor of English, Kalamazoo College, since 1953.

Conrad Hilberry — professor of English, Kalamazoo College, since 1962. His book of poetry, *Encounter on Burrows Hill*, will be published late this year.

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